

Posted on Sun, Jul. 16, 2006

Council considers crematorium, concerns mount

RICHMOND: Worries rise over more air pollution and a location that is blocks away from community centers

By John Geluardi

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Richmond, a city known for its heavy contributions to air and water pollution, is considering inviting another smoke stack industry to the community -- cremation.

Stewart Enterprises, owner of the Neptune Society and one of the three largest funeral corporations in the United States, has asked the Richmond Planning Department to change the city's funeral ordinance.

Neptune wants to move its Apollo Crematorium, perhaps the busiest in the state, from Emeryville to Richmond. The proposed location at 1151 Hensley Street is on the edge of North Richmond, an unincorporated low-income residential community of mostly African Americans and Latinos.

The YMCA Child Development Center, which is licensed to care for 60 infants, toddlers and preschoolers is just three blocks downwind from the site. And on the next block is the Shields/Reid Community Center and soccer field.

At least one other company, the Bay Area Cremation and Funeral Services, is considering a move to an undisclosed location in Richmond if the ordinance is changed.

The Planning Commission approved Stewart Enterprises' request on June 1, and the City Council is to consider adopting the change Tuesday.

Currently, the city's funeral ordinance allows cremation only on cemetery grounds. If the council approves the ordinance change, at least nine city zoning areas would be open for crematoriums if they obtain a conditional use permit.

The zoning change has raised questions of environmental justice because cremation is associated with emissions of carcinogens such as arsenic, hexavalent chromium and chlorinated dioxins and furans, according to the Bay Area Air Quality Management District's annual report on toxic air contaminants.

But the most serious concern is mercury emissions, which the air district does not closely monitor. Mercury is known to slow mental development and is a cause of memory loss, attention deficit disorder and fertility problems. Pregnant women and children are particularly vulnerable to mercury.

Neptune's Apollo Crematorium cremates about 3,000 bodies a year, according to the air district. That means annual emissions of somewhere between 3.5 and 25 pounds of mercury depending on various formulas used by the cremation industry, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the British government.

SUPERVISOR SPEAKS OUT AGAINST CREMATORIUM 2-2-2-2-2-2

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District does not monitor mercury unless the emissions are greater than 57 pounds a year. The district also does not consider cumulative impacts of any particular toxic material in its licensing requirements.

North Richmond community leaders say that is a concern because of the effect of air pollution from numerous existing industrial sources including the Chevron refinery, General Chemical, the West County Wastewater Treatment Plant and the Contra Costa County Sanitary Landfill.

So no matter how much mercury the crematorium will emit, six North Richmond community leaders say they plan to strongly oppose the ordinance change at Tuesday's meeting.

"We do not want any crematorium in our community," said Lee Jones, president of the North Richmond Municipal Advisory Committee. "Especially such a busy, Kmart-type of crematorium. We're a very poor community and we need businesses here, but we want green friendly businesses that won't threaten the health of our children."

Neptune's Northern California President of Operations Bill Farrar did not return calls Friday, but Jack Springer, executive director of the Cremation Association of North America said the cremation process is safe.

"You are exposed to more mercury just by walking into a dentist's office," he said. "People use emissions as a reason to oppose crematoriums in their neighborhoods, but it's really more of an emotional issue."

Some North Richmond parents remain dubious.

On a recent afternoon, Noe Torres was watching his two sons play on the swings at the Shields/Reid Community Center, about five blocks from the crematorium's proposed location. He said he worries about his children's health because of industry in the vicinity.

"I don't think we want that here," he said looking down at the shards of broken glass on the playground's paved surface. "We don't need it. We already have too much problems from Chevron."

Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia wrote to the council asking them not to approve the ordinance change.

"Allowing a stand-alone crematorium near residents is just wrong," he said. "And why should West County, which is trying to change its public perception, be opened up to another smoke-stack industry?"

Mayor Irma Anderson and several council members have said they are not inclined to approve the change.

Contact John Geluardi at 510-262-2787 or at jgeluardi@cctimes.com.